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UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION 8

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DEC 23 2011

Ref: EPR-SA

Ernest F. Kuhlman, Chair
San Juan County Commissioners
1557 Green Street
P.O. Box 466
Silverton, CO 81433

RE: Upper Cement Creek, Silverton, Colorado

Dear Commissioner Kuhlman:

Thank you for your November 22, 2011, letter to Martin Hestmark regarding Upper Cement Creek and the National Priorities List.

Your letter identifies concerns that are commonly raised by communities when the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is evaluating an area for the National Priorities List (NPL). Let me assure you that the EPA has not made a decision concerning listing of the Upper Cement Creek area. The decision to propose a site for the NPL can only be made after a technical evaluation is completed to determine if the site is NPL eligible. The EPA is just completing this technical evaluation. In addition, both the State and the EPA seek community support prior to a site being proposed for listing and the EPA wants the community to understand why we are looking at this option.

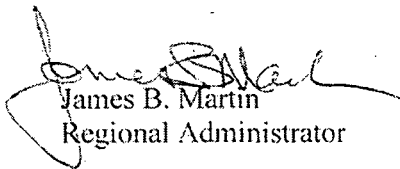
More than 15 years ago, the EPA committed to a community-based environmental protection effort in San Juan County, and indicated that Superfund would not be used as long as progress was being made in improving water quality in the Animas River. Unfortunately, water quality has significantly degraded in the Animas River in the last five years. It is evident that historic mine waste in Cement Creek, a tributary of the Animas River, is having a negative impact on the Animas. These impacts are likely related to cessation of water treatment in Gladstone and plugging of the American Tunnel. EPA has compared the last five years of data to earlier data sets that indicated improvements in water quality. The Animas River Stakeholder Group (ARSG) has summarized some of these data and the EPA is also evaluating these data. If experience in other mining impacted areas is any guide, the resources required for solutions to this sort of problem will be substantial and long-term operation and maintenance of the solution or solutions may be required.

The EPA is working with other federal agencies, the State, and local community members and would like to work with you to identify options to reverse the degradation and improve water quality in the Animas River. It is too soon to make conclusions about how best to correct this condition. However, if the best solutions require substantial and long-term

resources, CERCLA process and the NPL may be the only means to assure that full resources available to the EPA can be committed. EPA is also limited in its ability to fund interim actions and long-term projects that require ongoing operations and maintenance.

The EPA looks forward to continuing the dialogue with you and other local elected officials and the community regarding possible options to address water quality issues in Upper Cement Creek. If you would like to discuss this further, please contact me or your staff may contact Martin Hestmark, Deputy Assistant Regional Administrator for the Office of Ecosystems Protection and Remediation at 303-312-6776 or hestmark.martin@epa.gov.

Sincerely,


James B. Martin
Regional Administrator

